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The Technique of the "Scarlet Letter"

by

Ida M. Finkle

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY

Ida M. Hinkle

ENTITLED *Technique of the Scarlet Letter*

IS APPROVED BY ME AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF *A. B.*

Daniel Kilham Dodge

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF *English*

The Technique of the "Scarlet Letter"

The principles of composition are relative, determined mainly by the point of view from which an author looks at life. This point of view is the basal principle of his art, and necessarily determines its form. The classification of the novel, in all its various ways, depends, fundamentally, on this truth. A broad classification ranges between the extremes of the realistic novel and the idealistic, issuing from the author's interest in the spectacle of life or its moral and ethical significance. The technique of the novel varies indeed, and the same methods differ in effect as they are modified by the author's purposes.

The two main elements of the novel are plot and character. The different modes of portraying character in the novel are adapted from the natural ways by which people are known. Character is revealed, primarily by speech and action, in a less



degree by personal appearance and impressions received by others. The author has, also, the prerogative of dissecting the inner life and revealing the hidden regions which generate the forces of action.

The different methods used for developing character in the novel may be definitely outlined:

- I. Speech of the characters themselves.
- II. Narrative of their actions.
- III. Thoughts of the characters revealed directly to the reader.
- IV. Author's description of the personal appearance of his characters, and of the surroundings which throw light on their various qualities.
- V. Author's comment on action, thought and appearance of the characters.
- VIa. Narrative and analysis of characters' thought, by the author.
- VI. Bits of the author's philosophy of life which explain characters.
- VII. Impressions of other characters.
- VIII. Narrative of speech.

In the "Scarlet Letter" the different amounts of space given to these methods, for each character, are:

	Hester.	Dimmesdale.	Gillingworth.	Pearl.
I.	11.6 pp.	12.6 pp.	11.8 pp.	3.8 pp
II.	4.2 ..	4.7 ..	2.8 ..	5.5 ..
III.	.9 ..	2.6 ..		2 lines
IV.	3.6 ..	5. ..	2.7 ..	6.8 pp
V.	8.1 ..	9.2 ..	2.7 ..	5.
Va.	30.8 ..	16.6 ..	3.9 ..	25 lines.
VI.	2.4 ..	3. ..	1.5 ..	16 ..
VII.	4.2 ..	9.2 ..	4. ..	4.6 pp.
VIII.	8 lines	21 lines.	3 lines.	10 lines.

The amount of space has no absolute value, but serves to show what phase of the life of his characters was most interesting to the author and indicates that the purpose of the "Scarlet Letter," in case of the two main characters, is to deal with mental states. These amounts serve

also as a basis for studying the au-
¹⁸The amounts are counted in the Standard edition of the "Scarlet Letter," a volume of 312 pp. which gives 256 pp to the story and 56 pp. to the introduction.

author's use of the different methods
and the effects he produces by them.

Speech is the natural expression
of character; if the conversation of
the characters in the story is con-
sistent it usually represents, with
more vividness and reality than any
other method, the qualities which
the author describes in his analysis
and comment. But the effect of
this element is modified by the au-
thor's purpose. The speech of the
characters may be used simply to
furnish necessary information, or the
conversation may be simple repartee
for the amusement of the reader.
It serves also to display exaggerated
peculiarities, and distinctive qualities
of the characters. A few examples
taken from two authors who differ
widely in their technique, will explain
these different uses of this method.
In "Adam Bede," George Eliot employs
the method to indicate the distinctive
qualities of her characters; a large
proportion of speech is used in this

medium to portray Helen and Eliza.
This use of the method permits the
characters themselves to unfold their
qualities before the reader; thus they
are independent of their author and
appear natural and realistic. In
"Pride and Prejudice", Miss Austen
generally uses the method, not to show
a well-rounded character but to dis-
play prominent, or exaggerated
features. Jane Bennet's speech shows
her angelic temper; Mrs. Bennet talks
to exhibit her foolishness. Even Eliza-
beth occasionally makes a remark
to display her wit; and some of
her conversations with other persons
of the story are good examples of
repartee for the amusement of the
reader. This use of speech gives
less vividness and reality to the char-
acters than the same method pro-
duces as George Eliot employs it.
Hawthorne uses this method in
still another way. The object of
conversation in the "Scarlet Letter"
is to outline the plot and to re-

real sacrifice and fatal states, to indicate by the more natural method the inner life which has been so carefully narrated by the author. The minister's address to Hester on the scaffold¹ indicates his mental state and suggests the struggle which is to follow. In the "Interview" the conversation intimates the action of Chillingworth in the plot.² Mr. Himmesdale's appeal in behalf of Hester³ defines the relation of Pearl to her mother as the symbol of the scarlet letter.

The conversation of the leech and his patient⁴ discloses the nature of the minister's mental conflict and indicates the physician's power over him. The second interview of Hester and the physician⁵ tells the result of that relation. Even the language of Pearl serves to

References of pages are to the Riverside edition of the "Scarlet Letter."

¹ p. 89.

² p. 95 ff.

³ pp. 140 + 141

⁴ p. 161 ff.

⁵ p. 204 ff.

indicate the trend of the story; her question to the minister as the three stand on the scaffold,¹ and later her reply, "Thou wast not true".² When she is watching the minister approach through the forest, she wonders if he has his hand over his heart because the "Black Man" set his mark in that place.³ While she is waiting for the procession she reflects, "what a strange sad man he is," etc.⁴

A comparison of the "Scarlet Letter" with "Adam Bede" and "Pride and Prejudice", in regard to the amounts of space given to speech for the main characters, will show an interesting point in the difference of technique of these novels. Half of the space given to the character of Miriam Morris in "Adam Bede", is devoted to her conversation; one third of that given to Adam is speech. The

¹ p. 186.

² p. 190

³ p. 225.

⁴ p. 273

proportion of space given to this
method for Elizabeth Bennett, in
"Pride and Prejudice", is one third.
In the "Scarlet Letter", about
one sixth of the amount given
to Hester and Dimmesdale is
devoted to their speech; for Gilbing-
worth the proportion is much larg-
er although the actual amount
of space is no greater than that
given to the other two characters;
for Pearl, the space given to speech
is much less, the proportion
being only one ninth of the en-
tire amount. The characters pre-
sented by George Eliot and Miss
Bruston are more or less realistic
figures. Hawthorne's characters,
on the other hand, lack reality.
This seems to indicate that a
fair proportion of natural, con-
sistent speech is an important
element in producing life-like
characters.

Narrative of action, too, in the
"Comparable of figures on p. 3.

"Scarlet Letter", derives its value from the author's purpose of exhibiting mental states. Not the act itself, but the thought which prompted it is the important thing. The slightest gesture, a change of attitude, a glance of the eye, have dramatic significance. In the conversations¹ the slight actions which accompany the remarks of the speakers are delicately suggestive of unuttered thought. The involuntary act of the minister in pressing his hand over his heart² is always indicative of mental disturbance. So, Hester, gasping for breath, endeavors to tear away the scarlet letter, when Pearl's baby hand reaches for it.³ When the child throws wild flowers at the letter, her mother's first motion is to cover her bosom with her clasped hands.⁴

¹ p. 94 ff. p. 160 ff. p. 204 ff.

² pp. 91, 140, 161, 187, 226, 235, 266.

³ p. 121.

⁴ p. 122.

Narrative of action seldom has the dramatic importance which it receives in the "Scarlet Letter"; generally, action is not so significant in portraying character. The proportions of this method used in "Adam Bede" and "Pride and Prejudice", are much larger than the amounts given to it in the "Scarlet Letter." Except in the case of Pearl, where the proportion of action is almost one fifth of the entire space devoted to her character, the actual amounts of space are small. But in the two former novels, where the situation represents every day life, there will be, necessarily, more action with less significance than in such a novel as the "Scarlet Letter" where the scene is removed from the every day world. An example of unimportant action in "Adam Bede" is the various movements of the men in the carpenter shop, Chapter I; in "Pride and Prejudice" compare table of figures, p. 3.

Prejudice," Elizabeth Bennett's visit to Scutcherby, with all the trifling actions of the journey through the park, Chapter XLIII.

Descriptions of personal appearance are generally more important in sketching a vivid picture than in showing the qualities of the character; and yet this method is especially effective, in the "Scarlet Letter", in representing the strange nature of Pearl. One fourth of the space devoted to her is given to this method. The various descriptions showing her grace and beauty produce a vivid, clear-cut picture.

Her actions, too, given in the form of narrative descriptions², are important in showing her strange and elfish character.

Personal appearance serves also to indicate mental states. It is used for this purpose in the descriptions of Hester³, of Chillingworth⁴,
pp. 114, 127, 221, 249, 272. ² pp. 120, 122, 163, 213, 244. ³ pp. 74, 197+8, 243, 268.

⁴ pp. 82, 204.

and of the minister!

Both George Eliot and Hawthorne give a large proportion of space to their own comment on their characters. It is a significant fact that Miss Austen uses this method sparingly; for it reveals, more clearly than any other, the taste and opinions of the author, and so violates a cardinal principle in the doctrine of the realist - that the personality of the author shall be concealed. This element, and also the author's philosophy of life, are too analytic to be effective in actual character-portrayal. The author's "philosophy" consists of generalizations, the chief value of which is to lead the reader to a more sympathetic interpretation of the character, and a milder judgement of weaknesses and defects. In the "Scarlet Letter" Hawthorne's philosophy gives his reader a deeper insight into the motives of Hester,² Hinn-

¹ pp. 88, 297

² pp. 198, 200.

mental' and the physician.² The large proportions of this method used by Hawthorne and George Eliot show their fondness for such generalizations. Like comment, this element also runs counter to the principles of the realist, in revealing the author's personality. Scarcely more than half a dozen lines of Miss Austen's "philosophy" are to be found in "Pride and Prejudice."

A comparison of the different ways in which narrative and analysis of thought are used in the "Scarlet Letter" and in "Pride and Prejudice", will show the opposite effects which may be produced by this method.

Almost half the space given to the character of Elizabeth in "Pride and Prejudice", is devoted to this method. A large portion of this amount however, does not give the analysis of Elizabeth's mental state, but is used as an artistic means of pre-

¹ p. 177, 241. ² p. 152, 153

representing the other character; the reader views the ball room with its throng of people, through the eyes of Elizabeth, and laughs with her at Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine. Not a psychological analysis but a picture of actualities is thus presented. In the case of the two main characters of the "Scarlet Letter," large proportions are given to this method, and the method is used only for the purpose of mental analysis. External interests are excluded; the attention is confined wholly to analysis of specific mental states and conflicts. The character of Elizabeth is rendered more natural and life-like by these reflections which pass through her mind concerning people and events. Hester and Dimmesdale become unreal by the exclusion of the external world and the predominance of purely mental life.

The method of representing characters through the impression of

Other personages in the story, is used in several ways; at some they are presented in thought narrative, or in conversation. When the characters are talking or thinking of each other, they seem to be independent of the author's guidance, and their opinions have the force of reality. The reader receives a very definite impression of Winwood¹, the old physician², and little Pearl³, through Dexter's reflection about them. In "Adam Bede", George Eliot uses this method of impressions very effectively in conversation. A vivid impression of the qualities of the different characters is produced by what Mrs. Poyser says of them. The method as used by George Eliot gives a more realistic effect than does Hawthorne's use of it.

The characters of the "Scarlet Letter", with the exception of Pearl, are vague and shadowy; the action is too psychological for reality.

¹ p. 231, 201.

² p. 139.

³ p. 115, 200.

The relation to inner states, of speech, action and personal description, and also the large proportion of mental analysis indicate that the author's purpose is to investigate the hidden forces of action. It is no part of his intention to present a group of realistic characters. The value of the technical methods, as Hawthorne has used them, is not in portraying life-like characters. His interest is not in the personages of the story as representing individual men, but rather as types of general human nature under the stress of a particular condition. The vital interest of the "Scarlet Letter" - the evolution of character under this given condition - centers in the second element of the novel, the plot.

The plot of the "Scarlet Letter" may be compared to that of the serious drama. The action of the tragic plot is the outgrowth of the characters; the dramatist reveals this evolution by the speech of the actors.

In the "Scarlet Letter" the author proceeds in the opposite way, by the use of mental analysis. It is with this conflict of mental forces, in the dramatic sense, that the "Scarlet Letter" is concerned. Two definite lines are followed in the development of this conflict: the effect of the sentence which society pronounces on Hester Prynne, and the results of the punishment inflicted on Mr. Dimmesdale by the old physician. Dramatically the story is developed in four scenes; the three scenes at the scaffold and the meeting in the wood; this outline is filled in by the intervening mental analysis, the spiritual evolution of which these incidents are merely the visible symbols. The first eight chapters are devoted to Hester, the story of her life in the village, and Pearl's relation to her mother as the symbol of the scarlet letter, the emblem of her guilt and torture. The effect of Hester's sentence is to make her an outcast;

she stands apart from moral interests, the world's law is thrown aside. Her thoughts turn to dangerous speculations which are fatal to the office of the scarlet letter; her life during this time is merely fitting her for a second temptation. In chapter VIII Mr. Himmesdale and the physician are introduced, the second line of the plot is taken up, and the three following chapters describe the relation of the two men. The careful analysis of Mr. Himmesdale's mental conflict, his craving for confession, and the cowardice which he checks his impulse for truth, prepare for the scene in the wood and the dramatic close. Several allusions are made throughout the story, which foreshadow the meeting of Hester and the minister, and the final catastrophe. Examples of this are: Chillingworth's significant words in the "Interview"; Hester's words

p. 99, 100.

But a eddling of conscience; ¹ Mistress Hibbin's remark to Hester, ² the expression of gloom and terror in the poor Minister's eyes; ³ the magic touch which is to transfigure Hester; ⁴ the scarlet letter had not done its office. ⁵

The first chapter is of no importance in the structure of the story. The introduction properly begins with chapter II. The first description gives the setting and atmosphere necessary to the understanding of the story. The conversation of the group before the prison door presents the situation of Hester and prepares for her appearance; Mr. Dimmesdale's name is mentioned, with his high position in the community. In Hester's reminiscence on the scaffold the necessary information of her past life is given, preparing for the appearance of her husband in chapter III. In these two introductory chapters all the characters appear, the setting of the

¹ p. 107, 108. ² p. 144. ³ p. 157. ⁴ p. 198. ⁵ p. 2

story is described, the situation is complete and the conflict of forces foreshadowed. The "Interior" of chapter IV begins the rising action. Chillingworth's design to discover the man who has wronged him, and Hester's promise not to reveal the identity of her husband, furnish the complication for the second line of the plot. The action, until Chapter XII, which marks the climax, or more properly the turning point, is very slow. But after chapter XII the relations change. Hester becomes aware of the minister's danger and resolves to help him. Her resolve furnishes the tragic force for the falling action. After chapter XII the interest rises steadily until the climax of suspense is reached in chapter XVII, the scene in the forest. The reaction begins at the close of the following chapter, when Pearl hesitates at her mother's call. The effect of the final climax is produced by a skillful use of dramatic

irony. The passages which lead up to it, the descriptions of Hester,¹ and the crowd gazing at her,² the impression given by the minister's eloquent sermon,³ and the eminence of his position,⁴ all serve to heighten the dramatic effect of the scene which completes chapter XXIII, and marks the artistic close of the story.

The descriptions are all for the purpose of localizing the action and giving the proper atmosphere for the setting of the story. The grave puritans in their high, steeple-crowned hats, the magistrates on the balcony of the Governor's hall, the New England holiday, the procession all are necessary for the background of the action; some understanding of the custom of the period is indispensable.

The story advances by a steady and constant method of progression which leaves nothing to be explained.

¹p. 270, 271. ²p. 279. ³p. 289, 294, 295. ⁴p. 296.

During the dramatic scenes the movement is rapid. The action of chapters II, III, and IV occupies only a day. The narrative of chapters V to IX covers an indefinite period. The only interruption of this chronological order occurs in chapter IX, where the second line of the plot is taken up, and the narrative returns for the moment, to the opening scene. In chapter XII it is definitely stated that twelve years have passed. The movement of the latter half of the story is more rapid; only a few days elapse between the action of chapter XII and XV; and the final action, chapter XVI through XXIII occupies only three days. This steady sweep renders studied motivation unnecessary. Each successive incident is motivated in the natural progress of events. Transition of scene, too, is accomplished by this straight-forward progression; the background changes naturally and almost imperceptibly as the action

proceeds. All unnecessary localization of scene is carefully suppressed, and only in the dramatic situations are the surroundings brought prominently forward. Everything is subordinated to the main theme of the book and contributes to the unity of effect.

In continuing this one pervading effect of the occult spiritual element, Mr. Hawthorne uses methods which are peculiarly his own. Moral symbolism is the instrument for embodying an abstract thought in concrete images. The rose-bush among the weeds by the prison door opens the story with a keynote of symbolism. The next instance is the lurid gleam of the scarlet letter along the dark passage way;² then, the knowledge of evil in other hearts, revealed by the fatal letter;³ Pearl herself is the symbol of the token on her mother's bosom;⁴ the reflection of the child and the letter in the mirror of the breast-plate;⁵ Pearl's reply to Mr. Wilson

¹ p. 68 ² p. 111. ³ pp. 127, 139, 141. ⁴ p. 132, ⁵ p. 138.

that she can be plucked off the
bush of wild roses 'by the prison
door';¹ the assurance of minister
Trilling;² the relation of Hester-
worth and the minister;³ the bars
which Pearl arranges on the scar-
let letter;⁴ the vision of the letter
in the sky;⁵ Pearl's story of the
Black Man;⁶ the moral solitude
in which the fatal letter encl-
oped its secret.⁷

It further means of producing
a vivid, concrete effect is by sug-
gestiveness. By this method,
one brief sentence acquires dramatic
significance. A few examples will
illustrate this: Pearl arranges bars
on the scarlet letter, "Hester did not
pluck them off."⁸ Mr. Dimmesdale
tells the child that the daylight
of this world shall not see their
meeting, "Pearl laughed again";⁹
the sexton mentions the letter in

¹ p. 138.

² pp. 144, 181, 264, 287.

³ p. 159.

⁴ p. 163.

⁵ p. 189.

⁶ p. 222.

⁷ p. 279.

⁸ p. p. 163.

⁹ p. 186.

the sky, and the minister replies,
"No, I had not heard of it;"¹
Pearl heard her mother's voice and
came slowly back, "Slowly, for she
saw the clergyman."²

The dramatic scenes compose the
essential structure of the "Scarlet
Letter". There is a strange incon-
gruity between the author's power
in the management of these
scenes, and the one fault which
mars their artistic effect. Hawthorne
seldom fails to interrupt a dramatic
situation. The first instance occurs
at the close of the "Interim", chap-
ter IV. Just one obtrusive phrase,
"And now" said old Roger Gill-
worth, as he was hereafter to be
known,"³ then the curtain drops,
the scenery falls with a crash, and
the author is telling the story.
When the three are standing on
the scaffold, illuminated by that
strange and solemn splendor, the
minister is left with his hands

¹p. 192. ²p. 246. ³p. 99.

clasped over his breast and his eyes turned toward the sunset while the author explains the interpretation of meteoric appearances.¹ In the "Revelation of the Scarlet Letter", the explanation of Pearl as a messenger of anguish to her mother, is too analytic for so dramatic a scene.

A second fault may be called undue formality. In the account of Pearl's attire which heightened her airy charm, but appeared to have a deeper meaning, the author says, "We may speak further of it hereafter". Immediately following the description of the change in Brester's appearance, is the remark, "We shall see whether Brester Pymme were ever afterwards so touched and transfigured".³

These formal statements resemble the method in the scientific textbook, of outlining the subjects to be treated.

¹ p. 304.

² p. 107.

³ p. 198.

Further examples of this undue formality are: "Roger Chillingworth possessed all, or most, of the attributes above enumerated;" "To sum up the matter";² the minister's revolution of thought and feeling after the meeting in the wood is illustrated in three definite instances.³

Another fault is gratuitous information. Hester goes to deliver a pair of gloves for the Governor, and the reader is informed of the Governor's political affairs.⁴ Hester's summons at the door is answered by a servant, and while Hester waits, the condition of the bond-servant is carefully explained.⁵

The entire conclusion⁵ furnishes an excellent example of such gratuitous information.

These are defects, however, judged from the modern point of view.

At the period when the "Scarlet Letter" was written the artistic novel

¹ p. 153.

² p. 156.

³ pp. 260, 261, 262.

⁴ p. 125.

⁵ p. 305 ff.

had not attained the perfection of form which is its distinguishing merit at the present day. So definite are the rules for the author's guidance, that he need not go astray. But it is natural that the path traced by the pioneer should deviate from the lines of symmetry; yet the roughness of the way detracts very little from the lines of symmetry; yet the roughness of the way detracts very little from the beauty of the scenery. Too great emphasis must not be placed on the faults of the "Scarlet Letter", which are, after all, merely blemishes on a fine work of art.

The great point in the novel is the author's purpose, and the technique is poor or excellent in proportion to its fitness for that purpose. It is the law of art that the motive shall be inherent in the work. The ethical element is certainly inherent in the "Scarlet Letter", but, distrusting the reader's

art, perhaps, the author very artistically transfixes the moral, "like a lion through a butterfly." Notwithstanding the too evident moral, and the various inartistic flaws, the technique of the "Scarlet Letter" accomplishes its purpose.

Through its vague, fantastic characters, the atmosphere of moonlight, the shadowy landscape, the fine suggestive touches and the pervading symbolism, the reader's fancy is haunted by the vision of the scarlet letter and its spiritual significance; these elements combine to express the hidden forces which are the true reality of life. The technique of the "Scarlet Letter", in this respect, approximates the highest function of art - to suggest the occult forces of nature, to render accessible to the feelings, by finite terms, the infinite and incomprehensible.

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